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ABSTRACT

Service learning is valuable in connecting students with the world outside the classroom, resulting in a more just society for the future. However, many so-called service learning projects develop no clear link between service and learning, and lose their potential for turning students into agents of social change. Using the National Association of Secondary School Principals/Quest model for service learning as a guide, and applying principles of cultural studies and experiential learning, a critical service learning framework was devised composed of four steps: pre-reflection on oneself to achieve "political clarity," immersion in social theory and theorizing, action that includes dialog with the partnering organization, and critical reflection to integrate and personally contextualize the experience of service learning. Four areas are crucial to developing effective critical service learning. First, this framework should sharpen critical thinking skills that will transfer to daily life, particularly in areas of social difference. Second, introducing teacher candidates to critical service learning can equip them with the critical thinking skills they will be fostering in students. Third, care must be taken by teachers to foster an environment of tolerance and respect, rather than paternalism, charity, or pity. Finally, the practical implementation of the framework can happen right now in various ways. (Contains 20 references.) (TD)

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The Evolution of Critical Service Learning for Education: Four Problematics

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Introduction

Service learning as an educative tool has become increasingly more popular in classroom settings ranging from high school to the university.[1] In fact, according to a 1999 survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, "sixty-four percent of all public schools, including 83% of public high schools, had students participating in community service activities recognized by or arranged through the school" (Kleiner & Chapman, 1999). Given the proliferation of service learning initiatives in K-12 schools and in higher education, it seems appropriate to ask some essential questions: What is being 'learned' in service learning projects, What *should* be learned through service learning (Carpini & Keeter, 2000) and, finally, what role should educators take in the intellectual development and practical facilitation of service learning plans?

While service learning projects may range in scope, the attraction for many educators has often been the potential to connect students to their communities and beyond through participation in service learning initiatives. Typically, students participate in a wide range of activities beyond the walls of the school and, with the teacher acting as a facilitator, spend time in the classroom connecting the experience to certain pedagogical (and often civic) objectives. It is important to recognize that while the aims of service learning projects are varied, many school-based projects endeavor to broaden student's critical engagement with social difference. Moreover, as we have

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argued elsewhere (Masucci and Renner, 2000), service learning, when activated for the purpose of the intellectual and practical apprehension of social injustice can become the foundation for a progressive (and transformative) educational experience. In our previous work (Masucci and Renner, 2000) we presented a practical service learning framework which infused key cultural studies concepts into a new model that we called *Critical Service Learning.*[2] By looking more closely at the evolution of critical service learning we hope to differentiate our notion of service learning (which takes social justice seriously) from other frameworks. In addition, we hope to shed light on some of the problems associated with the implementation of critical service learning projects.

In the remainder of this paper we will address the following topics: First, we expand on the idea of critical service learning and promote the benefits and differences of this experientially-based activity over other service learning models, paying particular attention to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)/Quest four-step framework of preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration. Second, we introduce an amended framework that seeks to infuse key concepts from the cultural studies tradition and explore in greater detail the implications of service learning projects that incorporate these steps. Finally, we offer concluding remarks that explore the chasm between practical implementation and theoretical idealism, focusing on the ramifications of widespread critical service learning imperatives on both teacher education programs and public school initiatives. In particular, we focus on four potentially problematic areas: (1) Participation in the service learning projects vs. Future participation in society, (2) The role of teacher education, (3) The dynamic of the 'server vs. the served', and (4) How this framework can be practically implemented right now.

Evolving the NASSP/Quest's four steps under the lens of cultural studies

In a nation of increasing diversity, a widening chasm between rich and poor, and an anesthetizing focus on consumerism, education may be failing to connect students to the realities of social difference. In this sense, educators seem to be missing an opportunity to better 'equip' their students to become active participants in the social practices required to sustain a democracy. Education has traditionally been charged with some daunting tasks, not the least of which is citizenship education. But what type of 'citizen' is it that is being educated? If one adheres to the notion of an *active* democracy and the development of a service learning agenda, schools can help to focus more attention on service to the local and global community as a way of connecting their students to each other and the world around them; thus, creating a more engaged citizenry. In our view, service learning is a way to do this.

Service learning, however, needs to be considered *critically*. In their 1997 publication, "Service Learning: Raising Service Projects to the Next Level," the NASSP and Quest International, promote a valuable template by which service learning projects could be modeled. However, in our review of the literature (Burns, 1998; Warren, 1998; Barlow, 1999), we find that many so-called service learning projects are in reality, community service projects, or quasi-internships that develop no clear link between service *and* learning. Moreover, participation in these internship-type projects often provide limited tools to address issues of social justice outside the confines of the classroom. Service learning, in these cases, becomes nothing more than a meaningless feature of the status quo and loses its potential for turning students into agents of social change.

In our critical review of service learning, we are suggesting an evolution of the four steps from the NASSP and Quest. As a high school teacher, one of us had the opportunity to create a service learning curriculum for our high school. Using the NASSP/Quest steps as a guide, a slightly different framework that also incorporated four-steps was devised: (1) pre-reflection—why does the student want to become involved in this course, what are the expectations, etc., (2) action—in this case, tutoring in inner-city public schools in Cincinnati, Ohio, (3) readings, speakers and open-forum discussions that related to our action in the inner city—for example, the students read *Amazing Grace* (1995) and entertained speakers from a local homeless newspaper, and (4) reflection—through journaling, debriefing discussions, and creating a website to document our experiences. While these steps were an enhancement over a good model, these steps have further evolved from a cultural studies analysis.

As a result of our experience in a graduate seminar with Dr. Handel Wright at the University of Tennessee, we had an opportunity to participate in a service learning project (that involved volunteering in a library located in a housing project), while simultaneously critiquing the previously designed NASSP framework toward a more critical cultural studies-type project. What we have done is practically applied some of these ideas and theorized about how they might look in a middle school or high school classroom. Given the cultural studies analysis, it is instructive to look at what particular facets of cultural studies have helped to inform our framework and explain deeper where the framework stands in its evolution.

Although cultural studies is traditionally difficult to define, it does claim certain tenets that appear to be immutable. Projects should be political, involve praxis (Hall,

1992; Wright, 2001), focus on social justice (Fisher, 1997; Warren, 1998; Wright, 2001), and end in some form of intervention. As a result, the four-step service learning framework has evolved into a more critical four-step framework of: (1) pre-reflection—that seeks Freire's (1992) political clarity, (2) theory (and theorizing), (3) action—where steps two and three serve as the praxis for the project, and (4) reflection—where the student has an opportunity to re/interpret, re/create, and/or re/evaluate their pre-reflections and make some decisions about how to engage more conversantly in school, society, or future service projects.

In acknowledging the application of cultural studies ideas in the development of the framework itself, we also recognize the efforts of Handel Wright (2001) in attempting to blend a cultural studies and service learning agenda in what he terms "service learning for social justice" (Fisher, 1997). Toward the ultimate goal of social justice, we are suggesting that the framework of critical service learning may be *one means* toward that end. We further advocate that the projects selected should be 'political' and endeavor to partner with social justice oriented organizations. Educators must seek out projects that are counter-hegemonic and work to ameliorate situations of social injustice (e.g., literacy, hunger, racism, etc.). Oftentimes organizations exist that can act as a liaison between grass-roots movements and partnering schools thereby matching a group's particular needs with a school's interest in participation. Students will hopefully understand that their actions, theorizing, and reflections do not conclude at the end of the semester or the year. Perhaps the most critical piece of the project occurs when students are no longer in the classroom and become 'citizens' of the world.

A Closer Look at the Framework

We now take a closer look at this four-step framework for service learning, highlighting how each step looked in the library project that we completed and subsequently how they might look in a middle or high school classroom. After the examination of these steps, we will offer a sample of our ongoing critique of the framework, exploring four immediate problematics.

Pre-reflection is the initial phase of a critical service learning project. Pre-reflection at its root, of course, has reflection. In this case, one should reflect upon and politicize oneself (i.e., investigating who we are and what we stand for, as well as investigating our past service experiences, our preconceptions about the project and our predictions as to its outcome). Paulo Freire (1992) refers to this investigation of self as seeking "political clarity." He states,

> A politicized person is one who has transcended the perception of life as a pure biological process to arrive at a perception of life as a *biographical*, *historical*, and *collective* process. A politicized person is one who can sort out the different and often fragmented pieces contained in the flux. Political clarity is possible to the extent that we reflect critically on day-to-day facts and to the extent that we transcend our sensibilities so as to progressively gain a more rigorous understanding of the facts. (p. 130).

In our particular case, for example, we realize the starting point for the ongoing pursuit of political clarity should begin with the recognition of our multiple privileges in society, including, but not limited to, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

In this *pre*-reflective turn, it is also instructive to focus on the prefix as this step takes place before any action occurs and may even happen before participation in any service learning project occurs. In our seminar class, and in the subsequent service learning experience, we were able to use this beneficial step by considering, for instance, how we might plug into an already existing project and examine our preconceived notions of what a library project in a low-income housing community begun by a Christian church might entail. In addition, this pre-reflection helped us to challenge and expand these notions by fostering a dialog within our university seminar setting among those from diverse experiences. At the middle or high school level, this stage is crucial to developing a more critical consciousness in our students. Allowing students to examine (in the form of writing or critical discussion) their experiences with or conceptions of social injustice is a crucial underpinning for the growth that we as educators hope to foster during a project.

While preparing for the project, step two in the framework requires us to introduce our students to social theory and show how praxis will inform the project (and, subsequently, our lives). Again, looking to Freire (1987), he argues that as we begin to read the written word, we also begin to read the world—the construction of the word and the world are essentially simultaneous. In other words, as students come to better understand issues of social difference through exposure to theory (the *words*), they will be better be able to identify and name these issues when they arise in the service environment (the *world*). Taking a cultural studies perspective, this notion, of course, can (and should) also work in reverse: reading the *world* (through an understanding of one's lived experience) and the *word* (providing an update to theory).

As a matter of praxis, theory (and perhaps more importantly, theorizing) and action work intricately together because one without the other can make furthering a social justice agenda far more tentative and less sustained. In the library project we participated in, we *addressed,* for example, theories of pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), notions of teacher as intellectual (Gramsci, 1970; Giroux, 1997), and issues such as reproduction and resistance (Giroux, 1983), and *theorized about* how our action updated and informed these theories in the present context (e.g., how social inequalities were reproduced in the library and how the children and/or community resisted).

In order to better understand and promote an agenda of social justice in service learning projects, educators are strongly encouraged to immerse themselves and their students in theory, which may help explain phenomena at work when students enter the service environment. This statement suggests that the role of the teacher will have to be enhanced to that of *teacher as intellectual*—requiring, not unproblematically, a radical shift in teacher training. In this enhanced role, it is also important that the teacher be aware of the abilities of her/his students and adjust the introduction and discussion of these theoretical notions according to the abilities of the students. We certainly do not advocate having fifth graders read Gramsci's (1970) *Prison Notebooks*, but a more diluted and accessible version of some of these theories can be presented to students *and by students*, so that as they begin to construct their world in the service environment, they will have the critical discourse—the words— with which to name it.

Drawing from a cultural studies tradition of praxis (Hall, 1992; Wright, 1999), action must be the accompanying harmony that helps to inform and update theory. Given that one's actions can take on many forms and will be particular to specific service

learning locations, it is difficult to frame an all inclusive rule for activity; however, we suggest that the action include some type of dialog and/or dialectical understanding with those whom you are partnering in order to assure that the voice of that partnering organization is evident in the action. In addition, it is important that the service partners understand and fulfill their responsibilities in the partnership as well. For example, in the course that one of us initiated at the high school level, the partnering organization played a figural role in the development and continuance of the project, providing critical feedback on our intervention, speaking at some of our Friday meetings, and being open to new ideas presented by the students.

Through our participation/action in the library project (Masucci & Renner, 2000), we have also been able to draw in applicable theory, and in our reflections we have been able to pre-reflect about what might be next for the library and for future social justice projects (and, perhaps most importantly, future critical involvement in our democracy). Teachers are encouraged to see to it that students understand that the project does not end once this action is completed. The praxis continues with a critical reflection of the project and theorizing about future involvement with society.

The final step in the critical service learning framework is reflection. In many ways, this step is the foundation for the entire endeavor. Through critical reflection one has the opportunity to integrate and personally contextualize the experience of service learning. Again, the instructor and fellow classmates play a crucial role in helping to facilitate and expand on each other's readings of the experience. As educators, it is important to create a space where students can share and reflect upon their experiences. In the particular case of our service learning seminar, our fellow classmates and we had

the opportunity to present a critical analysis and report of our experience. This kind of reflective opportunity, coupled with the guidance of our seminar instructor, helped to stimulate a critical dialog between the seminar participants, as well as afford the class as a whole, an opportunity to better articulate the larger meaning of the experience of participation in a service learning project. Students at any grade should be afforded the same opportunity, understanding that the level and expectation of responses should be taken into consideration and made appropriate.

Moreover, it is important to point out that while we have numbered our steps one through four, we, don't necessarily see the projects beginning at one and ending at four, and don't necessarily hold to a numeric progression through the steps. For the purposes of starting a course in service learning or taking on a service learning projects, the steps provide a framework for attaching information, assignments and responsibilities. We really see the framework taking on a circular motion, or even a spiraling outward motion where all steps may be occurring at once or in a different order. The bookends of pre-reflection and reflection, for instance, may be difficult to discern if moving from one project to the next. Likewise, the 'chicken and egg' steps of theory and action may be difficult to define as to which came first and which informs the other. Hopefully, what we have provided is a useful (albeit brief outline of a) framework from which to launch a critical discussion of how service needs to be applied to classrooms in our nation's schools. While the interpretation of the framework may be left to the individual teacher in any given context, the integrity of the framework, we hope, will be left intact.

Problematizing Critical Service Learning

Having laid out the basic tenets of critical service learning, we think it may be instructive to stop where we are to take a sobering view of the framework and problematize some of the areas that may need more attention. To conclude our paper, we look at four areas in particular that we view as crucial to the overall project of critical service learning: (1) Participation in projects vs. Future participation in society, (2) The role of teacher education, (3) The dynamic of the 'server vs. the served', and (4) How this framework can be practically implemented right now.

Participation in Projects vs. Future Participation in Society

What we have strongly suggested thus far is how a critical service learning project might look in a school setting. This is, in fact, where critical service learning starts. However, we see critical service learning as having a potential beyond the years spent in middle school, high school, or even college. While the circular motion of the four steps lends itself nicely to moving from one project to the next, what happens when the student graduates and there is no next "project?" Our hope is that projects utilizing this framework may help to introduce and sharpen valuable critical thinking skills. Although some students may continue to engage in particular "service projects" beyond school (where a critical service learning framework is still a viable tool), we realize these students would represent a minority. We also recognize that students-turned-citizens of the world may not strictly adhere to this four-step framework when working in their respective spheres of society, but it is our hope that some of the fundamental tenets of critical service learning may remain, thus encouraging critical interpretations and interrogations of daily life, particularly when operating in areas of social difference.

While it is important not to "oversell" the potential of critical service learning projects in and of themselves, we continue to reevaluate our own framework to the extent that we may discover how these connections may indeed be possible.

The Role of Teacher Education

When one examines the role of the teacher in this service learning framework (Masucci & Renner, 2001), it is clear that we advocate a significant shift in the orientation of teacher training. While many teacher education programs offer, and indeed require, course-work in the areas of multicultural education, critical pedagogy, diversity training and the like, many more do not. It is imperative in our estimation to equip teachers with the same kind of critical thinking skills that we would expect them to foster in their own students. However, the reality of many teacher education and certification programs is that the teacher-in-training can become overwhelmed with the nuts and bolts of their particular program, including the many hours of 'best' methods courses that prepare pre-service teachers for the standards-driven (non-critical) curriculums they will more than likely be expected to take on in the field.

In our view, it is essential to restructure teacher education so that issues of social justice, tolerance of social difference, and an orientation to action become more central to the mission of teaching. Of course the incorporation of these ideas into teacher education programs seem to be important, but how do you implement them considering the aforementioned obstacles? One way to move teacher education in this direction may be to introduce the teacher-candidates *themselves* to critical service learning and action research projects that demand them to engage in both action and theory. Since "83% of high schools" are engaging in community action projects, colleges of education need to

begin to take a more expanded view of teacher education beyond preparation for the reality of standards in the classroom. Thus, not only do service projects for pre-service teachers provide a valuable template for the future facilitation of service projects in their own classrooms, it can also introduce important theoretical concepts that, when coupled with action, help to promote important critical thinking skills and a social justice orientation that can serve as one of the fundamental convictions of education.

The Server and the Served

The very notion of "service learning" implies a server and a served, however, it is important to realize that this orientation can perpetuate and encourage the marginalization that we seek to address and eliminate. It is meaningful to clarify that the application of this version of service learning is far-reaching and widely applicable, even though the language of service learning has often suggested a hierarchy of power and privilege. There seems to be a sense, informed by a critical look at the *language* of service learning, that many who participate in service projects do so out of a sense of guilt or obligation towards those less fortunate than themselves. This sense, however, can create a problematic *us* vs. *them* dichotomy. Moreover, many projects have involved students of relatively privileged backgrounds participating in projects to "help out" those less fortunate. While this dynamic is not automatically problematic, care must be taken by the teacher to foster an environment of tolerance and respect, rather than paternalism, charity, or pity. Furthermore, it is important to realize that, while many of the partnering agencies are comprised of people living and working in less privileged communities, it is not for lack of intellect, resourcefulness, ingenuity, leadership, or vision.

But, what about activating service projects in relatively less privileged schools? It is important to note that the experience of participating in critical service learning projects is certainly beneficial in these school settings as well. As we have stated, one aim of critical service learning is to foster critical thinking skills that are applicable beyond any given project. In this sense, the ability to engage in a dialog about the dynamics at work in a particular service setting, no matter who is participating, can cultivate the kind of critical engagement with society that is necessary to promote change and empowerment in those living with the reality of marginalization and oppression. Ultimately the value of the discussion in the classroom, as well as the participation outside the classroom at the partnering organization, is to allow for a meaningful exchange of ideas and critical dialog about important social issues. Toward that end, each student should be able to articulate and share the insights gained from their personal experience within and beyond the service learning context.

The Immediate Practical Implications of Critical Service Learning

Finally, we would like to address (and to be critical of) how these projects can be activated without any of the changes suggested in teacher education or massive shifts in the political landscape. As mentioned earlier, an expanded version of the NASSP framework was already implemented at the high school where one of us taught. The curriculum was added as a separate elective course in a religion department. This same type of addition is possible at any school that offers electives in either social science departments or religion departments (if the school is thusly affiliated). Since "64 percent of all public schools" already engage in community service programs, we know that the interest exists. What we aren't sure of is what passes for community service in these

locations; therefore, we think it is helpful to have an operational framework such as critical service learning to provide some type of common denominator for all service projects. While not all teachers receive their degrees from cultural studies in education departments, nor do they always have an opportunity to take critical courses as part of their teacher training, the critical service learning framework can be implemented in a number of ways and can be operated at many different levels of comfort. First, not only can critical service learning become its own course, it can also become an aspect or a requirement of an already existing course (like ours at the graduate level). Secondly, the level of comfort with social or philosophical theories may dictate the level to which theory is covered in the framework. But, we maintain that all teachers who are selecting projects that work toward ameliorating social injustice, can educate their students on issues of social difference by providing them with applicable literature pertinent to the service situation or by having the community partner come and speak to the students so that they are better informed regarding the issues that affect the lives of the people in the community with whom they may be partnered. Although teacher's lives are already complicated by classrooms that are bursting at the seams, standardized testing that interrupts much of the school year, and continuous paperwork, service to the local and/or global community needs to be viewed as an important aspect of what we as educators do. Since most schools already recognize this important feature of education, we are merely suggesting a way to do it that equips our students with important critical tools that they may use beyond the walls of the classroom.

Continuing the Conversation

As part of our ongoing critique of the critical service learning framework and in the spirit of cultural studies, we invite comments and constructive criticism from the wider academic community toward a further evolution of these four-steps. Although only briefly introduced here, we continue to develop a more in-depth exposition of these steps, suggesting how they could be best implemented in middle schools through graduate schools, and showing how critical service learning is a viable framework for a "service learning for social justice" agenda. While we understand that many different agendas exist for the activation of and outcomes for service learning initiatives, we hope that what we have provided is a persuasive voice within this conversation to consider the potential of service learning projects to work for justice. Considering the four problematics above (and the numerous others not mentioned), we acknowledge that the task set before us is not an easy one; however, we see service learning, particularly the initiation of a critical service learning framework, as a valuable endeavor in connecting our students with the world outside of the classroom, resulting in what we hope is a more just society for the future.

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Notes

[1] This presentation is a closer examination of key features of our article (2000): Reading the Lives of Others: The Winton Homes Library Project—A Cultural Studies Analysis of Critical Service Learning for Education.

[2] The ideas underpinning the evolution of this Critical Service Learning framework stem from: 1) the development of a service learning class and club at the high school level; 2) our participation in a graduate level cultural studies seminar (facilitated by Dr. Handel Wright at the University of Tennessee); 3) our participation in a library project at a public housing complex and the subsequent report we presented to our cultural studies seminar; and 4) our review and integration of relevant literature.